NAMAKKAL CAVES

The Namakkal Caves

Editor
Dr. S. VASANTHI, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Commissioner Incharge

Author
Dr. VIDYA DEHEJIA
BY
History Department, University of Sydney, Australla

Published by :
The State Department of Archaeology
Government of Tamilnadu

Third Edition : 2014.
T.N.D.A. Pub. No. 11.

© Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology.

Editor
DR. S. VASANTHI., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Commissioner Incharge

THE NAMAKKAL CAVES

Author
DR. VIDYA DEHEJIA

PRICE : Rs.17.00

Printed at the Department Press,
Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology.

Dr. S. VASANTHI M.A.,M.Phil.,Ph.D.
Commissioner Incharge

Department of Archaeology
Tamil Valarchi Valaagam,
Halls Road,
Egmore,
Chennai-600 008
07-01-2014

PREFACE

I feel happy to bringout the reprint of this book titled 'The Namakkal Caves' by Dr. Vidya Dehejia, which was well apprecieted by the art historians, histocians and the general public at the time of its first publication.

The reprint of this book will serve the need of the scholars in the study of Namakkal caves and their creator Adayaman rulers.

S. Vasanthi

The Namakkal Caves

The mention of monuments belonging to the seventh and eighth centuries in Tamilnadu calls to mind primarily the magnificent rock-cut and structural temples of the Pallavas, and the somewhat lesser known examples of Pandya rock- cutting. During this same period however, the relatively unknown Atiya rulers excavated two cave-temples at Namakkal in the Salem district-caves containing large bas-relief sculptures possessing a vitality and dynamism hardly matched elsewhere. The caves are cut into the sides of the large rocky hill in the centre of the town, and both have later structural additions in the form of mandapas and subsidiary shrines. Both the cave-temples are dedicated to Vishnu and are under worship today. The Narasimha cave is located at the foot of the hill on the west side of the rock, while the Anantasayi cave is located half-way up the east side of the hill and has a set of built-up steps leading to it.

Historical Introduction

The Atiya or Adiyanman rulers were among the ancient ruling families of south India. Together with the Cheras, Pandyas and Cholas they are known to us from the Tamil Sangam literature that dates from the early centuries of this era. Among their most prominent rulers of that early time was Adigaiman Neduman Anji, patron of the renowned poetess Auvaiyar. The Adiyamans ruled from Tagadur, modern Dharmapuri, and their domain

The Namakkal Caves

The mention of monuments belonging to the seventh and eighth centuries in Tamilnadu calls to mind primarily the magnificent rock-cut and structural temples of the Pallavas, and the somewhat lesser known examples of Pandya rock- cutting. During this same period however, the relatively unknown Atiya rulers excavated two cave-temples at Namakkal in the Salem district-caves containing large bas-relief sculptures possessing a vitality and dynamism hardly matched elsewhere. The caves are cut into the sides of the large rocky hill in the centre of the town, and both have later structural additions in the form of mandapas and subsidiary shrines. Both the cave-temples are dedicated to Vishnu and are under worship today. The Narasimha cave is located at the foot of the hill on the west side of the rock, while the Anantasayi cave is located half-way up the east side of the hill and has a set of built-up steps leading to it.

Historical Introduction

The Atiya or Adiyanman rulers were among the ancient ruling families of south India. Together with the Cheras, Pandyas and Cholas they are known to us from the Tamil Sangam literature that dates from the early centuries of this era. Among their most prominent rulers of that early time was Adigaiman Neduman Anji, patron of the renowned poetess Auvaiyar. The Adiyamans ruled from Tagadur, modern Dharmapuri, and their domain

was northern Kongu which included the Salem district. The exact extent of the Kongu country itself is not known, except that it would seem to have been bounded by the territories of the Cheras, Pandyas and the Cholas. The Adiyamans appear to have been involved in frequent wars with the neighbouring kings, and in the days of Neduman Anji were forced to accept Chera suzerainty. We know very little of the fortunes of the Atiya rulers in the succeeding centuries and hear them again only in the eighth century from inscriptions of the Pandya kings and from their own undated records at Namakkal. The eighth century Adiyaman rulers seem to have been engaged in conflicts with the Pandyas, the Western Gangas and the Pallavas. One Atiya king allied himself with the Pallava and Kerala rulers in a battle against the Pandyas. An inscription dated in the 17th year fo Pandya Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan - A.D. 784-tells us that this Adiyaman ruler who remains unnamed, was defeated in three battles, his chariot and a troop of horses confiscated, and his domain subdued and apparently taken over into Pandya territory. The previous Pandya king, Maravarman Rajasimha (A.D. 730-765) also appears to have fought with the Atiya rulers as we are told that he subdued the area of Malakongam an area that quite possibly included the Namakkal region. Rajasimha Pandya's predecessor Koccadaiyan (A.D. 700-730) called himself Lord of Kongu, but we have no indication as to whether he was involved in any conflicts with the Atiyas . It appears however, that around A.D. 784 Adiyaman territory was annexed to the Pandya kingdom . We may regard it as quite certain that the Atiya inscriptions at Namakkal were engraved in the days of independent Atiya rule prior to A.D. 784, since

these records refer proudly to the Atiya kula and proclaim the greatness of the ruler Gunasila who was responsible for the cutting of the caves.

Inscriptions

The four main inscriptions from Namakkal are engraved in the Anantasayi cave of the corbels of the pillars and on the beam cut above the corbels. The script is Grantha and the language Sanskrit. One inscription tells us that the cave known as ***Atiyanatha-vishnu-griham*** was caused to be made as a shrine to Vishnu by the Atiya king Gunasila. Another inscription much damaged refers to the cave as ***Atiyendra-vishnu-griham*** and to the Atiya kula. A third record, very fragmentary, refers to Soma of the Atiya family, who was the eldest son of a lady apparently connected with noble or royal lineage. It would seem that Soma was another name of the king Gunasila mentioned in the first inscription. The fourth record is engraved on the beam above the main sanctum containing the Anantasayi Vishnu and is of great interest. It refers to the shrine as ***sayya griham (sayanagriham,)*** and apparently lists the gods, attendants and ***asuras*** depicted around the reclining Vishnu. The iconographic importance of such a record will be apparent.

In addition to these inscriptions, nine ***birudas*** of the king Gunasila are found engraved on the pillars and pilasters of the Anantasayi cave, and a single one on the rock face near the spring beside the cave While the Narasimha cave itself contains no inscribed records, two ***birudas*** may be seen engraved on the rock-face to the right

of the cave 2. This engraving of ***birudas*** is reminiscent of the practice of the pallava rulers particularly of Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha who had some three hundred titles inscribed on his various monuments. The twelve ***birudas*** at Namakkal do not repeat any of those already assumed by the Pallavas although similar virtues are extolled. Gunasila describes himself as ***madana-vilasa*** (manifestation of the god of love; compare with ***kama-vilasa'*** a title of Rajasimha in the 48th niche of the Kailasanatha at Kanchi); ***udara-chitta*** (of exalted intellect); ***vimala-charita*** (of spotless character); ***nara-deva*** (god among men); ***naya-para*** (one who exceeds worldly wisdom) ***mana-sara*** (the epitome of honour); ***prakritipriya*** (devoted to his subjects); ***naravahana*** (one whose vehicle is man); ***utpala-karnnika*** (one who has lily like ears); ***manomaya*** (the spiritual one); ***sribhara*** (he who holds riches; compare with ***sridhara,*** a known title of Rajasimha); ***silibhritan*** or ***sitibhutan*** of wide spread fame).

Palaeographic evidence cannot help us very much in the matter of fixing the date of the Namakkal inscriptions in any exact manner . Comparative material comprises on the one hand the records of pallava Rajasimha (A.D.700-728). and of the other the Anaimalai (A.D.770) and Tirupparankunram A.D.773) inscriptions of Pandya Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan. By this stage of its development the Grantha script was highly advanced and atleast three varieties of grantha are known from the inscriptions of Pallava Rajasimha alone. Salient features

of the Namakkal records include the presence of the looped variety of *na,* as well as a *na* with a closed loop at the base; the open-mouthed *bha* as also a flat-topped broad form of *bha;* a round topped *ga* and *sa* with the arms tending to curl inwards; an open-mouthed *sa* and a *la* with its curve tending to circle around. A comparative analyses reveals that almost all these features, and further varieties, are to be found in one or another of the inscriptions of Pallava Rajasimha. The Panamalai record displays three types of *na* and two of the open-mouthed *bha*. The flattopped broad *bha* is to be seen in the Atyantakama labels on the Dharmaraja ratha at Mamallapuram. Both arms of the *ga* and *sa* display an outward curve of the left arm. The Pandya records at Anamalai and Tirupparankunram on the other hand display only an h shaped type of *na;* the *ga* and *sa* invariably have outward hook to the left arm; and the curve of the *la* circles around and results in a cursive form. The form of conjunct *ya* at Namakkal is similar to that of the pallava records and to the Tirupparankunram Pandya record and is quite different from Anaimalai where it is of the hooked variety. This brief analysis indicates how difficult it is to place exactly within the eighth century any inscription from the Tamilnadu. On palaeographic grounds alone it is difficult to say much on the precise position of the Namakkal records. We would merely state that they appear to be earlier than Anaimalai and Tirupparankunram in optionally retaining the looped na and the flat-topped *bha.* It is not possible to be more precise than this.

Narasimha Cave-Temple

The Narasimha cave-temple is a wide rectangular cave with a raised shrine projecting from the back wall into the ***ardhamandapa***. The ***adhishthana*** moulding of the shrine consists of an *upana, jagati tripatta-kumuda, kantha* and a ***prati*** on top. The shrine platform has four pillars in front and two pilasters at the rear. Attached to the side walls of the ***mandapa*** and on a level with the line of the four shrine pillars are a further two pilasters. The ***ardha mandapa*** itself has two pillars in front and a once open facade. This has since been built in to enclose the cave and access in now through a central doorway. The two pillars of the ***mandapa*** are reminiscent of early pallava as well as early pandya examples. They are divided into two nassive square ***saduram*** with an octagonal ***kattu*** between and the sadurams are decorated with lotus medallions. The four pillars of the raised shrine reveal however a variation on this theme and have a graceful, slender appearance. They consist of three sadurams with lotus medallions, engraved on them, and two sets of octagonal kattu between. This is a rather unusual feature not known from the Pallava or pandya caves. The pilasters are plain and square in section throughout. The pillars are topped with curved corbels with a ***taranga*** moulding and a plain ***patta*** down their centre. Above the pillars of the shrine is a projecting cornice decorated with four ***kudu*** arches with a human head carved within each. The arches are quite plain and

have a distinctly shovel-shaped top. This feature is reminsicent of the pallava practice in which such ***kudus*** often decorate the moulding above the shrine entrance. This embellishment is also to be found in some of the Pandya caves. It is possible that there was some sort of veranda in front of the cave, but later construction has obscured any traces of this. The ***Mahisha mardini mandapa*** at Mamallapuram provides us with an example somewhat akin in floor plan to the Narasimha cave, in that it contains a raised rectangular porch with pillars. It differs from the Narasimha cave however, in having a cell cut into the back wall of this porch and in having pillars with a seated lion base.

The raised shrine of the Narasimha cave contains an enormous rock-cut seated Narasimha with attendant figures. The two back walls of the ***mandapa*** on either side of the shrine, and the two side walls between the pilasters and the front of the cave, contain impressive basrelief carvings. These commence on the level of the raised shrine. An examination of the themes carved in the cave reveals three depictions of the Narasimha ***avatar*** of Vishnu: within the Vaikuntha Narayana relief in which Vishnu reveals to the gods the form he will take; the actual slaying of Hiranyakasipu; and the seated Kevala Narasimha in the shrine itself. Two other incarnations are also represented the Varaha ***avatar*** and the Vamana ***avatar***. Since the temple is in worship the main image has several gold ***kavachas*** as for example on the hands and ***makuta*** and the stone of both this image and of the bas-reliefs is quite black and shiny having been covered with a coating of oil. The raised shrine also houses the metal ***utsava*** images.

The Vaikuntha Narayana relief on the left wall of the *ardha mandapa* displays a unique grouping of figures Vishnu seated on the coiled Ananta whose five hoods are spread out behind his *kirita makuta,* occupies the centre of the relief and is depicted with four arms. The *sankha* and *chakra* are not actually held in Vishnu's upper hands but are depicted in the air somewhat above them, with tongues of flame. This feature is to be seen extent, to set it apart from Pallava representaions. Vishnu's lower left hand rests on his knee, and the lower right is in the *kataka hasta* with the fingers bent lightly to touch the thumb a manner in which the hands of Vishnu are frequently depicted Makara kundalas are depicted in his pendant ear lobes, and he wears broad *keyuras* and *kankanas*. The lower garment is unusual. The angles in which the head, body and legs of the figure are depicted give it a delicate grace that sets it apart from other depictions of the theme, such as the comparatively heavy Chalukyan representation of Vishnu seated on Ananta from Badami cave IV that belongs to the last quarter of the sixth century A.D. To the lower front of the relief is a four-armed seated Bala Narasimha, revealing to the gods the man-lion form in which he will destroy the *asura* king Hiranyakasipu, to whom Brahma had previously granted the boon that he would be killed by neither man nor beast. Narasimha has a peaceful expression on his face, indicative perhaps of the deliverance from trouble that he will bring about. His upper right hand is in the *abhaya hasta* the protection-giving or reassuring pose-and the lower right hand rests on his knee. His upper left hand holds some indistinct object, perhaps a *sankha,* and the lower left is in the *kataka hasta.* A represention of Bala

Narasimha in a Vaikuntha Narayana relief is unknown elsewhere. Behind Narasimha is a four-armed standing figure of Brahma with three faces clearly visible. His lower left hand holds a ***kamandalu*** and his lower right is in the ***kataka hasta***. The upper left hand holds an ***akshamala***. Above Brahma is a bust of Chandra depicted as if behind the clouds and with his hands in ***anjali hasta.*** Standing to the right of Vishnu is a graceful figure of Siva with a deer depicted just above his upper right hand and a serpent held in his upper left hand. The lower left hand is in the ***kataka hasta*** and the lower right rests on his hip in the ***katyavalambita hasta. Sarpa kundalas*** are represented in his distended earlobes. Above Siva is a bust of Surya with a large halo behind his head, and with his hands in ***anjali hasta.*** Kneeling in front of Siva with one hand in the ***vismaya hasta*** indicative of wonder and the other hand apparently holding a lotus is a figure that probably represents the sage Markandeya. In front of him is a kneeling female figure with hands in the ***anjali hasta*** and possibly to be identified as Bhudevi. If the dentification is correct this is an unusal location and pose for Bhudevi in a Vaikuntha Narayana relief. The ***yajnopavita*** of most of this figures in this relief as in the others at Namakkal is depicted as going over the right arm and is reminiscent to the early pallava and of Chalukyan practice. The entire composition is beautifully balanced and the apparent ease with which the figures have been depicted reveals the undoubted mastery of the sculptor.

The next panel on the back wall of the andapa and to the left of the Shrine contains a powerful

representation of Sthauna or ugra Narasimha. An eight-armed figure of Narasimha with right foot on the ground and the left bent and placed on a raised pedestal is depicted slaying Hiranyakasipu to whom Brahama had also given the assurance that he would not be killed in heaven or on earth or through the use of any weapon. Narasimha is depicted holding Hiranyakasipu's helpless body off the earth with two arms while the other two are occupied in tearing into him with his claws. Strictly speaking it is the bowels of Hiranyakasipu that Narasimha is meant to tear into but here hands are depicted in the cest and indeed this is so in most representaions of the theme. Hiranyakasipu's dangling arms still hold the shield and sword with which he tried to fight Narasimha. Of Narasimha's four upper hands two firmly hold the ***samga*** and ***khadga*** and the other two have depicted just above them a sankha and chakra with flames. As in the Vaikunha Narayana relief Narasimha wears a ***karanda makuta*** and his lion face with small pointed ears is stylised as compared to the naturalistic representation in cave IV at Badami. Depictions of Ugra Narasimha are rare in the monuments of south India and the theme is unknown in pallava rock-cut monuments. Pandya rock-cutting however provides us with a representation from the Subrahmanya cave temple at Tirupparankunram. Other examples of the scene are known from the Chalukyan temples at Aihole and Pattadakal but none of these can compare for vigour and impact with the Namakkal example.

The main shrine contains an enormous rock-cut image of the seated Kevala Naraismha. On either side of

him are Surya and Chandra holding *chamaras*. Siva on the left and Brahma on the right are described as appeasing his anger aroused on the occasion of the destruction of Hiranyakasipu. The sages, one standing either side have been identified as Sanaka and Sanandana: they perhaps report to the world the news of the slaying of Hiranyakasipu.

The panel to the right of the shrine contains a depiction of the Varaha *avatar* in which Vishnu took the form of a gigantic boar to rescue the earth from the demon Hiranyaksha who had hidden her under the seas. This theme has been a favourite with sculptors throughout the centuries, some of the most notable early depictions being at Udayagiri, Badami and Mamallapuram. The figure of the Varaha is shown here as if emerging from the waters, with one leg being hidden up to the knees, and the other to just above the ankles. Bhudevi, with her hands in the *anjali hasta* is seated gracefully on Varaha's upraised right arm and her legs are supported by his left hand. To the right of Varaha is seated the serpent Adisesha with his left hand in the *vismaya* pose depicting his wonder. To the left of Varaha is a part-kneeling female figure with her hands in the *anjiali* hasta. It is suggested that this represents Bhudevi giving thanks after having been rescued. It seems possible however, that it depicts instead Adisesha's wife since the *Vaikhanasagama* states that she must always be sculpted accompanying Adisesha. Above the figure of Varaha, and apparently behing a cloud are depicted four heads probably representing the sages Sanaka. Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara who according

to the *vishnu purana* sang a *hymn* in praise of Vishnu's deed. Varaha is represented with two arms only, unlike the depictions in the Varaha *mandaga* at Mamallapuram and in caves II and IV at Badami where the figure has four arms (the upper two holding the sankha and chakra). The upward tilt of the head of the Varaha and the feeling of momentous action pervading the relief is quite remarkable. At Mamallapuram there is a lack of this sort of atmosphere as the Varaha is depicted standing erect with both feet firmly on the ground, thus representing a moment in time slightly later than at Namakkal. The Badami reliefs though depicting the Varaha with both feet having emerged from the water, still retain a feeling of movement that makes them more akin to Namakkal. The *vakra danta* of the Varaha that may be discerned also at Mamallapuram and Badami, is here very prominently depicted. While this seems to emphasize its animal nature, a step in the opposite direction is seen though the introduction of the distended lobe to the Varaha's ear-a feature unknown in the other representations discussed.

The fourth relief, on the right wall of the *ardha mandapa,* is a panel depicting the Vamana *avatar* of Vishnu. This is a very forceful depiction and the individual figures deserve closer study. The theme is divided into two parts. To the right is depicted the tiny Vamana figure with an umbrella in his left hand, and his right held out to receive his gift of three strides of land from the mighty king Bali. In front of him is the standing figure of the king holding a water jug from which he is about to pour water, signifying the granting of the gift. Behind Bali is a figure, apparently protesting, and this seems to

represent Bali's *guru* Sukracharya who, perceiving the true nature of the Vamana strongly advised Bali against granting the gift. Sculpted above these figures is the head of a horse, with a stake in front of it perhaps indicating that these events took place at the ***asvamedha*** sacrifice. To the left, and occupying most of the panel is the next episode of the Vamana avatar in which Vishnu on receiving his gift, grew to an enormous size and covered the earth with one stride and the heavens with the second. The four-armed Trivikrama Vishnu is depicted with his left foot on the ground and the right raised to shoulder level. The representation thus exemplifies the instructions given in the ***Silparatna,*** as against the more usual depiction of Trivikrama standing on his right foot with the left raised as stated in the ***vaikhanasagama.*** Vishnu's upper right hand holds a ***khadga*** and the upper left has represented just above it a ***sankha*** with flames. His lower right hand is stretched out almost touching his upraised foot, and the lower left is placed on his hip in the ***katyavalambitahasta.*** An umbrella is depicted over the ***kiritamakuta*** of Trivikrama. The action of the scene is convincingly conveyed by the outward swing of Vishnu's ***makarakundalas*** and by the sway of his yajnopavita. To his upper right is the flying figure of Jambavan beating a drum to proclaim to the world the greatness of Vishnu. To Jambavan's right is a falling figure with sword and shield in its hands - a figure that seems to be indicative of the fight that ensued on Vishnu's assumption of the Trivikrama form. To the lower right of Vishnu we see Garuda overpowering Sukra as punishment for having tried to prevent the granting of the gift to Vamana.

The Vamana *avatar* theme like that of the Bhuvaraha, was popular both at Mamallapuram (Varaha *mandapa*) and at Badami (caves II and IV). At both these sites there are further depictions of the fight between the *asuras* and the attendants of Vishnu- an episode kept to the minimum in this representation. Vishnu is depicted with eight arms at Badami and Mamallapuram, while the figure here is represented with only four. At Namakkal, as at Badami, two episodes of the Vamana *avatar* are depicted, while at Mamallapuram, the earlier part with the Vamana receiving the gift from Bali is omitted. The actual figure of the Vamana at Namakkal and in cave II at Badami closely resemble each other in depicting, a young, plump and appealing boy, rather than a mis shapen dwarf or a *brahmacharin.* (In Badami cave IV the entire Vamana figure seems to have been chiselled way.)

Anantasayi Cave-Temple

The Anantasayi temple cosists of a raised rectangular shrine, with two pillars and two pilasters along the front. Two steps between the central pillars interrupt the *adhishthana* moulding which is similar to that in the Narasimha cave. The *ardha mandapa* in front is a narrow hall of slightly greater length than the shrine, but no wider, with two pillars and a once open frontage. Here too a wall has been built up to enclose the cave which now has three doorways opening into it. Beyond this the natural roof of the cave protects a few feet forward in a curve. The pillars of the cave are of the standard variety known from early Pallava and Pandya caves and consist of two square *sadurams* decorated with lotus medallions, and an octagonal *kattu* between. The two pilasters, which

are really attached pillars as they are almost complete in section, are square throughout with no intervening *kattu,* but have lotus medallions engraved on them. Curved *taranga* corbels with a plain *patta* are to be seen here too. The moulded cornice above the shrine is decorated with six plain *kudu* arches with human heads carved within.

The Shrine contains an enormous rock-cut image of vishnu reclining on his serpent with a large number of attendant figures. The two side walls of the *ardha mandapa,* on a level with the height of the shrine, display reliefs of Trivikrama and Sankara-Narayana. The Trivikrama panel on the left wall is continued on to the main wall of the *ardha mandapa,* just beyond the pilaster of the shrine front, and the corresponding space on the other side beside the Sankara-Narayana panel is occupied by a figure of Bala Narasimha. As in the Narasimha cave, the stone of the main image and of the reliefs has been covered with oil and is dark and shiny. Here too the shrine image has a number of gold *kavachas,* ad several metal *utsava* images are placed on the raised platform.

Pallava inspiration on architecural grounds seems apparent, the example closest in floor plan to the Anantasayi cave being the excavation at Singavaram dedicated to Ranganatha. Singavaram has a similar raised shrine with two pillars and two pilasters. The *ardha mandapa* in front has a further two pillars and two pilasters with a once open frontage now built up to enclose the cave. The pillars are typical early Pallava examples, divided into two *sadurams* decorated with

lotus medallions and an octaconal *kottu*. The corbels however differ from Namakkal and are of the angular bevilled variety with no taranga moulding. The major portion of the Singavaram sherne too is occupied by an enormous rock-cut reclining Vishnu on Ananta, with various attendant figures. Namakkal provides us with a more elaborate version of the theme. The Mahishamardini *mandapa* at Mamallapuram also presents us with an example of this theme which is sculpted in shallow relief on the left wall of the cave. The attendant figures are even fewer than at Singavaram, and Brahma himself is absent, thus apparently representing a moment in time prior to his appearance. Inspiration for the Anantasayi image may well have come from pallava examples.

The Anantasayi cave at Namakkal is dominated by the impressive figure of a *yogasayana* Vishnu lying on the serpent identified as Karkotaka. This five-hooded serpent is said to be the fiercest of the serpents and is hence represented with the face of a lion within each hood. Vishnu is shown with two arms, one stretched out, and the other bent and held in the *kataka hasta.* A large number of attendant figures are depicted around the *sayana* figure. The inscription engraved on the beam above the corbels of the shrine pillars can be of some help to us as it apparently refers to the carving within. It seems to list the figures grouped around Vishnu and refers to the whole as a *sayya griham*-an abode for the *sayana* or reclining form of Vishnu. The *Manasara* the famous text on architecture-refers to *sayana prasadas* intended for *sayana murtis.* (In this context we may recall the fortuitous occurrence of *mana-sara* as one of the *birudas*

of king Gunasila engraved on the southern pillar of the shrine.) The figures mentioned in the inscription do not seem to tally exactly with the figures carved in the shrine and there are slight variations. Near the feet of Vishnu and forming the end wall of the shrine are the powerfully modelled figures of the demons Madhu and Kaitabha, as if about to rush forward and attack Vishnu. Chandra is depicted at this end and the opposite end wall contains the figure of Surya. On the back wall of the shrine, above the reclining Vishnu, the figures include Brahma seated on a lotus rising from the navel of Vishnu, Narada, Tumburu and other sages. On the base of the serpent couch are represented the ***ayudha*** gods. The order in which the attendant figures are mentioned in the inscription is Markandeya, Maharishi, Parnna (garuda), Varuna, Brahma, Isa, Daksha, Sasi, Surya, Tumburu, Narada, Guru, Bhrigu, Sarnga, Kaupotaka (***gada***), Chakra Nantaka(***khadga***) Panchanjanya (***sankha***) Sri Madhu, Kaitabha. The representation would seem to belong to the ***uttama*** classification.

On the left wall of the ***ardha mandapa*** and continuing onto the back wall is a depiction of the Vamana ***avatar*** similar in its treatment to the relief in the Narasimha cave. The figure of Bali is carved along the back wall leaving the main area free to depict the Trivikrama figure of Vishnu. The difference in the depiction of the Vamana as compared to that in the Narasimha cave is interesting. The figure is here treated more as a young ***brahmacharin*** than as a plump boy. One hand holds an umbrella and the other is outstretched to receive the gift that Mahabali is in the act of presenting.

Here, there are no subsidiary figures beside Bali. The figure of Trivikrama is depicted in much the same pose as in the Narasimha cave, with his right leg raised to shoulder level and the right arm outstretched almost touching his leg. His upper left arm has a ***sankha*** depicted well above it, and the lower left is placed on his hip in the ***katyavalambita*** pose. Although the figure is very similar to that in the Narasimha cave, down even to the outward swinging ***makara kundalas,*** something in the way of forceful impact seems to be lost in this relief . The draping of the lower garment too is some what stylised as compared to the more naturalistic treatment in the Narasimha cave. To the lower right of Trivikrama is the partly kneeling figure of Garuda with his left hand i n the ***vismaya hasta***. Above Vishnu to his right is the flying figure of Jambavan beating his drum. Two other flying figures, one to the right of Jambavan and the other just above the ***sankha*** near Vishnu's left hand probably represent attendants of Vishnu. The latter flying figure has one hand in the ***suchi*** hasta and is apparently indicating Trivikrama Vishnu. Above this figure are an unidentified male and female figure perhaps representing a ***gandharva*** couple, depicted down to the waist as if behind the clouds and with an unusual curved configuration beside the male. There is no indication at all in this panel of the fight that ensued between the attendants of Bali and Vishnu. It is indeed remarkable that the sculptors at Namakkal should have twice chosen to depict the Vamana ***avatar,*** and that each panel with its slight variations should be so successful.

The figure of Sankara-Narayana, with his left half depicting Vishnu and the right Siva, is sculpted on the opposite wall of the ***ardha mandapa***. The ***Vamana Purana*** explains the form as a manifestation to a rishi to whom Vishnu explained that he and Siva were really one. The side representing Vishnu has one hand placed in the ***katyavalambita hasta***, and the other raised with the ***sankha*** with tongues of flame depicted just above the hand. Siva is shown with one hand holding a snake, and the raised hand with a deer just above it. The ***makuta*** shows a division with Vishnu's side being a ***kirita*** and Siva's side revealing a crescent moon on it. Vishnu has in his ear a ***makara kundala*** while Siva appears to have a ***sarpa kundala***. Sankara-Narayana is shown standing on a small raised platform and his posture is quite straight and erect, in the ***samabhanga*** as laid down in the ***Vishnudharmotara***. The lower garment of the figure, reaching almost to the ankles, is depicted in a some what stylised manner. There is some difficulty in the identification of the seven subsidiary figures depicted around Sankara-Narayana, and it has been suggested that they represent the river goddesses. However, five of the figures are male. Representations of Harihara frequently include the consorts of Siva and Vishnu, as well as their vehicles Nandi and Garuda. The ***tribhanga*** figures standing on either side of Sankara-Narayana with one hand on their hip and the other is the ***vismaya hasta***, could represent Nandi and Garuda, although in this being so. Both wear ***karanda makutas*** and have large ***patra kundalas*** in their ears, and are dressed in a very similar manner. The two female figures are both shown down to the hips only and could perhaps be Parvati and

Lakshmi although their placing would then be unusual. One is depicted to the right of Siva and has her hands placed in a relaxed manner on her hips while the other is shown directly above Sankara-Narayana with her hands in the ***anjalihasta***. A male figure to the left of Vishnu is also shown down to the hips. He is depicted with a ***jata makuta*** and probably represents a ***rishi***. The two flying figures at the top of the relief, on either side of the main image may possibly represent Surya and Chandra. Both are shown with one hand on hip and the other in the ***vismaya hasta*** and one figure has a small halo behind his head and may be Surya.

The standing figure of Kevala or Bala Narasimha on the adjoining wall is adjoining wall is depicted in a relaxed pose and is slender and graceful. His two upper arms have the ***sankha*** and ***chakra*** depicted just above them, with tongues of fire, and his lower right hand is placed in the ***katyavlambita hasta***. The figure is depicted with a ***kirita makuta*** unlike the standing Kevala Narasimha in Badami cave IV who has a crown shaped as a lotus bud[1]. As compared to the natural lion face at Badami, the depiction here is definitely stylised in a manner similar to that seen in the Narasimha cave. The figure wears a ***yajnopavita*** made of flowers, rather reminiscent of the late Chalukya tradition, and has several ornaments including ***harakeyuras*** and

---

1. Narasimha with a lotus bud crown is to be seen again in the Pandya rock-cut monolith of Kalugumalai.

kankanas.The ***udarabandha*** and ***katibandhas*** are elaborately decorated. Above Narasimha is a figure that appears to be a flying ***gandharva***.

Concluding Remarks

A date somewhere in the first half of the eighth century seems to be indicated for the two caves at Namakkal. Historical evidence provides us with a terminus of A.D. 784 by which time the cave must have been excavated. At that date the Atiya domain seems to have been annexed to the Pandyan empire by Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan. How much prior to that time the Atiya ruler Gunasila may belong depends to some extent on the exact interpretation of Pandya records. Thus Koccadaiyan (A.D. 700-730) is referred to as Lord of Kongu, and Maravarman Rajasimha (A.D. 730-765) is described as having subjugated the Malakongam. Whether in fact this means that the north Kongu Atiya territory with its capital at Tagadur was affected, we cannot tell. However, a mere defeat in battle would not have been sufficient to deter Gunasila from singing the praises of the ***Atiya kula*** in his inscriptions, or from excavating cave temples and having their walls covered with eloquent relief sculpture.

Inscriptional evidence indicates close contacts with the Pallavas. The assuming of ***birudas*** and the engraving of these on the monuments are very suggestive of Pallava

---

1. R. Nagaswamy, "Kalai Chelvangal", Dinamani, 5-11-1967.

inspiration. The same applies to the very styling of the caves as *Atiyanathavishnu-griham* and *Atiyendra-vishnu-griham,* strongly reminiscent as this is of the practice of Pallava Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha of describing his structures as *Pallavesvara-griham.* In view of this, it does indeed seem possible that Gunasila was connected in some way with the Pallavas, probably through his mother's line. R.Nagaswamy suggests that Gunasila's mother was probably a sister of Pallava Rajasimha[1]. It is unfortunate that the inscription describing the ruler as foremost among the daughter's son (*dauhitra*) of some person, should be so fragmentary. It would undoubtedly have furnished us with some definite information on Gunasila's ancestry. We have seen that palaeographic evidence is not of much help in fixing a date for the Namakkal inscriptions. The records display features that appear to be earlier than those of the Anaimalai and Tirupparankunram inscriptions of Pandya Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan-inscriptions dated to A.D. 770 and A.D. 773. They could however belong even to the period of Pallava Rajasimha a time at which a variety of scripts were in use.

Sculptural evidence indicates an undoubted influence from pallava carvings particularly in the depiction of tall and slender figures in the 'southern' style. Architectural inspiration from the same source is quite clear. A consideration of the choice of themes however, seems to point to the effect of Chalukyan rock cutting of the late sixth century. The Narasimha cave at Namakkal contains representations of the Vamana, Varaha and Narasimha *avatars,* and of Vishnu seated on Ananta-all

four themes found in one form or another in the verandah of cave IV at Badami. At Mamallapuram by contrast the carvings of the Vamana and Varaha ***avatars*** in the Varaha ***mandapa,*** are accompanied by two depictions of Devi-Gajalakshimi, and Durga with attendants. We may note also the similarity in the juxtaposition of the Sankara-Narayana and Bala Narasimha reliefs in ***ardha mandapa*** of the Anantasayi cave at Namakkal as compared with the Verandah of Badami cave IV. Apart from the main shrine images, most of the themes found in the two caves at Namakkal are to be seen in one form or another in Badami cave IV. In some episodes Namakkal presents us with the more elaborate rendering as in the case of Vishnu seated on Ananta, while in others such as the Vamana ***avatar,*** the Namakkal version reduces the number of subsidiary figures and presents us thereby with a more effective and vital depiction. The striking similarity of themes does indeed lead one to speculate on whether the artist or the ruler responsible for the carving of the two caves at Namakkal had perhaps visited Badami and been impressed by the choice of subjects in cave IV. While we have no inscriptional or literary evidence of any direct contact between the Atiyas and Chalukyas a comparison of the themes chosen for sculptural representation is suggestive of some communication. Certainly the Pallavas and Pandyas with whom the Atiyas allied them selves or fought on occasion, had frequent contacts with the Badami Chalukyas. The Atiya ruler's own prediliction for the worship of Vishnu as Narasimha resulted in the main

shrine image in one cave being a seated Narasimha image in one cave being a seated Narasimha and one of the subsidiary carvings depicting Ugra Narasimha unknown at Badami. In addition, this predisposition made itself felt in the unique introduction of the figures of Narasimha into a scene depicting Vaikuntha Narayana.

Architectural and sculptural evidence indicates an admixture of Pallava and Chalukyan traditions which the genius of the Atiya craftsmen transformed in to a single entity. A complete mastery of the art of stone relief sculpture is displayed at Namakkal. It is certainly a matter for regret that we have no further examples of sculpture from the hands of the artists responsible for the carvings in these two caves. The somewhat stylised treatment of the figures in the Anantasayi cave as compared with those in the Narasimha cave, together with the uniformity of style within each cave, leads us to suggest that the two sets of carvings came from the hands of two different sculptors trained however in the same school. Sculptural and architectural evidences leave little doubt that the excavations belong together. The two ***birudas*** engraved beside the Narasimha cave when compared with the inscriptions within the Anantasayi cave further emphasize this contemporaneity. It has been suggested that some twenty years may have been required to complete work on these two caves[1]. It seems to us that

the time taken to excavate caves in general has been greatly exaggerated. We would suggest that a period of around five years, somewhere in the first half of the eighth century, is sufficient to cover the cutting and sculpting of the Namakkal caves.

---

1. *K. R. Srinivasan and P. R. Srinivasan, "Atiya Inscriptions from Namakkal". Epigraphia Indica XXXVI' pp.131-138. p. 135, note 3. Their estimate is based on a period of twenty years for the excavation of Nasik cave III. We have shown elsewhere that Nasik III is is fact, the result of two phases of cutting and have discussed at some length the probable time span needed to cover the excavation of caves (Vidya Dehejia, "The Chronology and Development of the Cave Architecture of Western India", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1967, chapter IV).*

NOTES

Atiya-the name by which these rulers refer to themselves in their Namakkal inscriptions-is the Sanskritized form of Adiyan. The pandya records and the Tamil Sangam literature refer to them as Adiyaman or Adigaiman. We use these names interchangeably.

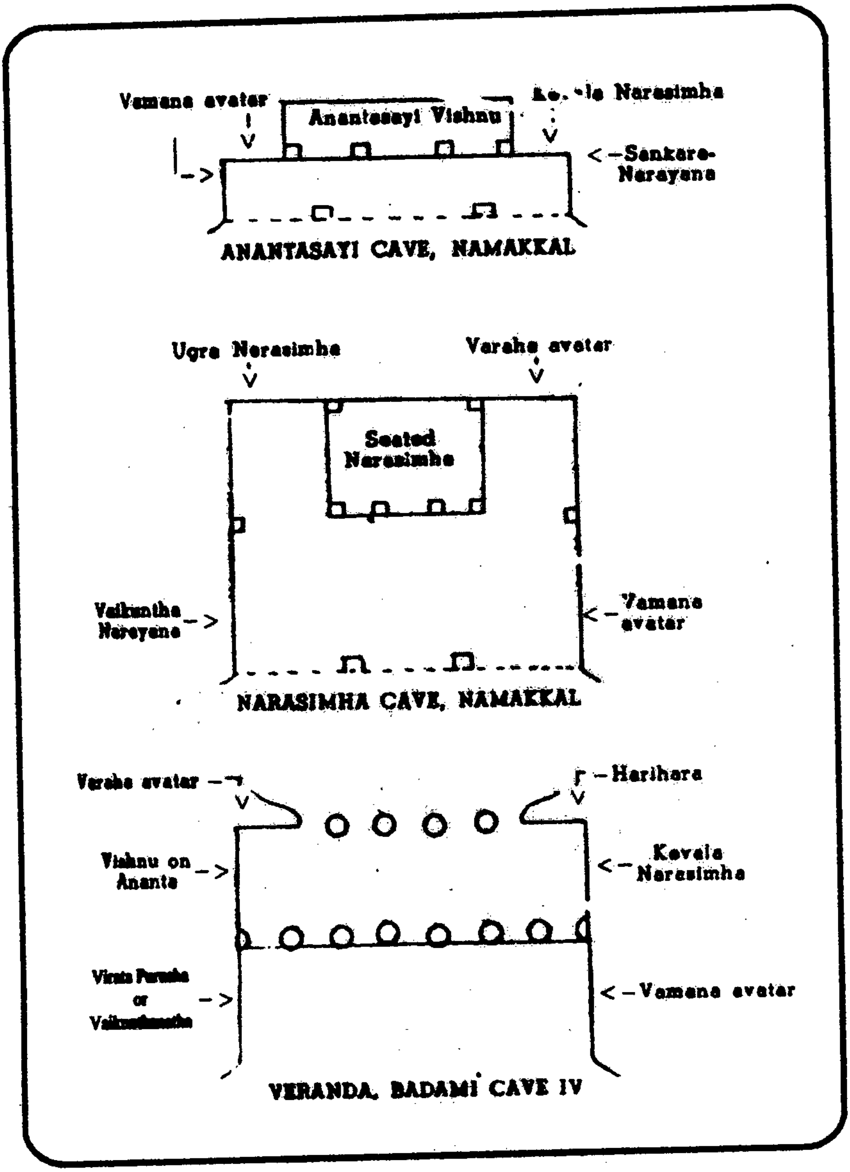
For the three *birudas* engraved on the rock surface outside the caves, see *Annual Report on South Indian Epigraphy,* 1938-39, p. 71.

The above report records two birudas reading *Sridhara* and *Silibhrta,* (actually it reads *Sitibhuta*) on the rock face outside the Narasimha cave. Besides these two birudas which are in Grantha characters, three more titles of the same king written, in Vatteluttu characters have been recently noticed immediately above the two labels by the Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology. They read *taccavu muthukila* and *mmaivali.* The letters are very shallow and are damaged at places. The import of these titles are not very clear but, like some of the birudas of Pallava Mahendra I, they sound like archaic Telugu-Kannada. This seems to strengthen the view, that Atiyas had some contact with the Telugu-carnataca region. The other two titles in grantha characters reading Sridhara and Sitibhuta, have a terminal "n", in Vatteluttu character. The combined use of grantha and Vatteluttu in these titles is interesting.

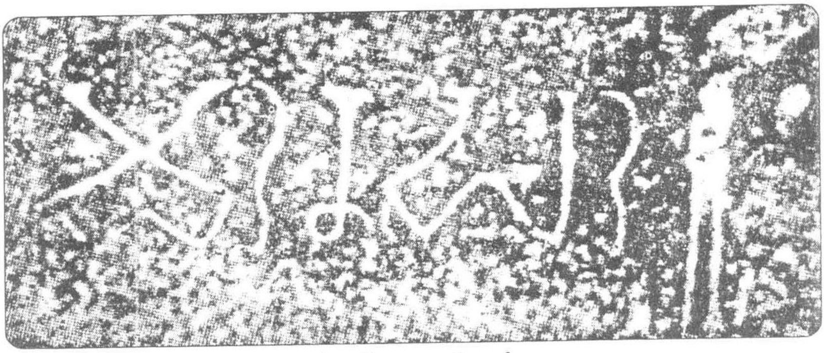
For other records see K.R. Srinivasan and P.R. Srinivsan, "Atiya Inscriptions from Namakkal", *Epigraphia Indica* XXXVI, pp. 131-138.

The following work may be consulted :

Srinivasan, P.R. "Sculptures in the two Rock-cut Vaisaṇva Cave Temple of Nāmākkal", ***Ārtibus Āsiae*** XXIV, 1961 pp.107-116 & Plates.



Sketch to illustrate placing of Sculptural themes (not to scale)



‘māna-sāra’

Bāla-Narasimha
Vaikuntha Nārāyana relief,
Narasimha Cave-Temple

Siva
Standing to the right of Vishnu, Vaikunta Nārāyana relief,
Narasimha Cave - Temple

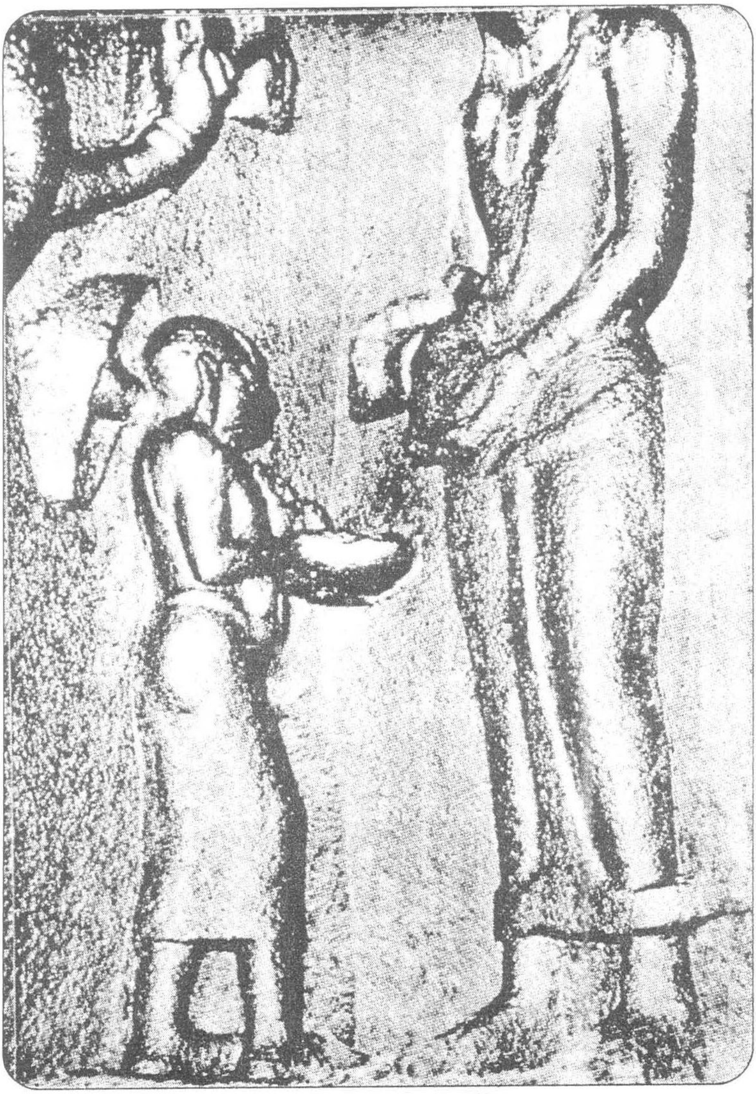
Ugra Narasimha
Left of the main shrine,
Narasimha Cave - Temple

Varāha Avatār
Right of the main shrine,
Narasimha Cave-Temple

Trivikrama Avatār

On the right wall of the ardha maṇḍapa, Narasimha Cave-Temple

Vāmaṉa Avatār
Receive his gift of three strides
of land from the king 'Bali'-Trivikrama relief
Narasimha Cave-Temple



Vāmaṉa Avatār
Receive his gift of three strides
of land from the king 'Bali'- Trivikrama relief,
Anantasayi Cave - Temple

Trivikrama
On the left wall of the ardha maṇḍapa,
Anantasayi Cave - Temple

Saṅkara - Nārāyaṇa
On the right wall of the ardha maṇḍapa,
Anantasayi Cave - Temple

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY
GOVERNMENT OF TAMILNADU
CHENNAI - 600 008